

**Sermon for the 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (A)**  
**Trinity Church**  
**Matthew 22:15-22**

Why were they “amazed?” Why did they go away shaking their heads and wondering at what had been said to them?

They were a strange mixture, agents of the Pharisees and some others who were connected with the Roman authority. Normally, the two groups would have nothing to do with each other and would see each other as adversaries if not outright enemies; but a common purpose brought them together. Politics, as we all know, makes strange bedfellows.

This unlikely brood approached Jesus with an agenda that they were not altogether successful at hiding: they wanted to kill him. But being law-abiding people, they wanted to do the job properly and legally. In law, procedure is everything, then as now. The civil courts of the Romans and the religious courts of the Jewish establishment government needed evidence to bring him to trial on a charge of capital treason. They wanted this troublesome person to convict himself out of his own mouth.

The approach was sly. They hid their real purpose behind a false sincerity and an exaggerated respect: “Teacher, we know that you are fair and truthful and impartial, and you will be that way with us. So we want to ask you a question: ‘Is it or is it not lawful to pay the emperor’s taxes?’” They presumed that with this question, they would trap Jesus between the millstones, because if he said “Yes,” the civil law would be offended, and if he said, “No,” the religious authority would be offended likewise. So the set-up was in place. The snare was laid.

A word of caution: For centuries this and other passages of the New Testament have been used to stereotype Jewish people. I want to guard against that here. The story belongs to one place, at one time, and in one set of conditions in history.

That being said, It was really a pretty crude scheme, and certainly Jesus was no fool. “Somebody show me a coin. Whose head is on the coin, and what is his title of authority?”

“Why, of course, it’s the emperor’s!”

“All right, then, give the emperor what belongs to the emperor and give to God what belongs to God.”

Our grandson is a serious debater on his university debate team. Cameron would be utterly captivated by the forensics of this exchange – if he could ever be persuaded to read it!

This is one of those mini-dramas of scripture that deliver so much meaning, with such dramatic effect, in so few words. Jesus not only sidestepped a trap, but in the process he opened a much larger spiritual vision. He had laid a trap of his own – a much more subtle one -- and those who were bent on luring him to his destruction went away. They went away amazed!

Amazed! The word that Matthew chose can mean a number of things. Were the inquisitors baffled and embarrassed by the failure of their plot? Were they astonished by Jesus skill in sidestepping their purpose or the sheer elegance of his answer? Pharisees in particular would be impressed by those things.

Or were they thunderstruck by the real point that Jesus made? Is it possible that they went away “amazed” because they had caught the real life-changing and world-transforming significance of what Jesus had said: “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that belong to God.” This is not just about the allocation of wealth. It introduces an entirely new economy: the economy of the Kingdom of God.

“Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar.”

Jesus understood the practical responsibilities of human life in any generation. That involves the need to provide the necessary things of daily life. The sharing of resources for the common good is a part of that, no matter how much we may contend about how that is to be done; and in spite of the fact that authorities could be corrupt or wasteful. Jesus understood all of that. Caesar’s coin, the ordinary currency of exchange in the human marketplace, has to be paid to Caesar.

“Give to God what belongs to God.”

What is it that belongs to God? What is God’s portion? What is it? - - - It is EVERYTHING!

God breaks through into all of life and transforms it: our values, our decisions, our responses in all of life's circumstances, family, work, recreation, religion, politics. To use Jesus' own astonishing figure of speech, even what we render to Caesar falls back into God's economy. The product and proof are a compassionate care for the other, a joyful willingness to lift up the fallen, to comfort the downcast, to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice.

It is an economy of gifts and giving, where in the name of Christ we exchange mysterious gifts with each other and with our neighbors, wherever they may be. That is the still small voice amid the clamor and rancor of our troubled time and it is the key to our own serenity of mind and spirit.

Last week Pastor Cheri Danielson gave an exciting sermon, here in this place. She told us that we should "revel in God," that we are absorbed in God and God's inexhaustible love, have we only the sense to recognize it. Her very manner in saying this gave us the clear message that this absorption into the life of God is our avenue to life and joy and peace. My sermon today is really the same one; and maybe it is the only one that there is. The amazing fact is that, contrary to all human arithmetic or logic, there can be no apportionment of responsibility between what belongs to the domain of practical human necessity and that which belongs to the Kingdom of Heaven. Everything belongs to the God, "in whom we live and move and have our being."